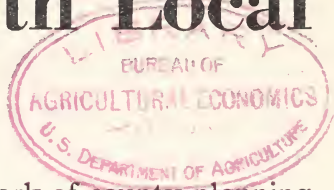


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Planning Committees Cooperate With Local Governments



BULKING large in the plans and work of county planning committees nowadays is a growing emphasis and reliance upon cooperation with their local governments, in joint efforts aimed at obtaining better land use conditions.

This type of cooperation is already showing beneficial results in many counties and communities. Local governments are finding frequently that the land use maps and classifications developed by the planning committees are useful in pointing out the areas where significant changes in population and land uses are occurring and where changes in public services and policies may be needed to fit the requirements of the people. Land use planning committees, for their part, are discovering that local governments can give much help in hastening some of the land use adjustments needed.

Local land use planning committees are interested in close cooperation with local governments because many of the activities of those governments have important direct effects upon the uses to which land is put. The committees are not concerned simply with local units of governments as such, but with those aspects of local government that have a bearing upon land use. They have an intimate interest, of course, in all phases of local government that affect the way in which land resources are used.

This leaflet is chiefly concerned with the county as a unit of local government. But planning committees are interested

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also in studying policies of other units of local government, such as soil-conservation districts, drainage districts, weed districts, irrigation districts, grazing districts, and others. These units of government and their place in the planning program will be discussed more fully in a later publication.

Counties Differ in Many Ways.

Some counties are entirely agricultural, mining, or industrial; others are purely commercial in nature, or have some of each of these activities. Some counties are large in area, as is San Bernardino County, Calif., which has 20,175 square miles, a population of 133,900, and a density of 6.6 persons per square mile. Others are small, but not so small as Hudson County, N. J., which covers only 43 square miles, and has a population of 690,730. Some counties are thickly populated; others are not. New York County, N. Y., has a population of 1,867,312, an area of 22 square miles, and a density of 84,877 persons per square mile; whereas Nye County, Nev., with a population of 3,989 and an area of 18,294 square miles, has a density of only 1 person to every 5 square miles. Other counties have extremely small populations, such as Loving County, Tex., with 195 persons and 753 square miles, or Daggett County, Utah, with 411 persons on an area of 850 square miles.

The total of the annual incomes of the inhabitants of each county also differ widely. The extremes run from less than \$200,000 to more than \$2,000,000,000 a year.

A great many counties approach the average area of 990 square miles; some contain close to the average county population of 41,000; and a large number have near the average density of 41.3 persons per square mile; but few counties, if any, are average in all three categories. Furthermore, while there are as few as 3, 5, or 8 counties in some States, other States have as many as 124, 161, or 254.

Local Governments Influence Land Use.

Many of the activities and policies of local governments—as in the operation of schools, roads, tax machinery, and the

management of publicly owned land—are closely connected with local land use problems and conditions. Each of these factors exerts great influence upon the way the land is used and is itself affected by the uses of land. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that through the cooperation of local officials, the work and policies of local government often may be shaped so as to encourage desirable land use adjustments. Cooperation between planning committees and their local governments in working toward better land use is, therefore, of major importance in the planning program.

As local public services and policies are closely associated with local land use conditions, county land use planning committees are finding it worth while to give careful study and thought to many of the operations of local government, and to discuss them frequently with their local officials. Some committees have already been able, as a result of their studies and discussions, to suggest improvements, expansions, or reductions in public services which are helping their counties obtain better land use conditions. But it is essential that recommendations like these be based upon the committees' careful study of all the considerations involved in suggested changes, so that all concerned can have a clear understanding of what the recommendations entail.

Much study and discussion with local officials is necessary on these points, because each unit of local government is designed to perform certain work and must carry out its job under general legislative authority. Often it may not be possible to obtain modifications in the activities or methods of local governments unless changes are first made in the basic State law underlying the particular unit of government.

Different Opportunities for Action.

The type of opportunities that exist for cooperation between planning committees and their local governments depends in some measure, of course, upon the type of problems found in each county. The problems of different areas are different and call for different kinds of solutions.

Local public services in a given community are a part of the standard of living of the people. These services may include,

among others, public schools, roads, public-health work, drainage work, forestry developments, parks, relief, State-aid cooperation, law enforcement, and various regulations for the use of land.

County planning committees are concerned with the problems of local government, not merely to find a way to reduce costs and tax burdens but also to aid in developing better systems of public administration to serve agriculture and contribute to the general welfare. As they deal with these matters, the county planning committees need the help and advice of local officials, just as local officials usually need and welcome the advice and findings of planning committees.

Lack of space prohibits full discussion of local problems and possible solutions in this leaflet. Brief suggestions as to the possible procedure for dealing with a few of the many questions that may arise are therefore discussed.

County Problems and the Planning Committee.

If the county planning committee is considering measures like zoning and the relocation of certain families, with possible reduction of the number of people occupying certain areas, thought will be given to the changes that may occur in the need for public services as well as in their organization and financing. Changes in the location of the people in an area, for instance, may require the closing of certain schools and the transportation of pupils to other schools.

Installation of a county-unit school system to take the place of large numbers of small local districts may be a desirable change in the organization for school services in some areas. This change may be wanted because any one of a number of results is desired—lowering of costs, improvement of the standard of education, adjustment to population changes, avoidance of duplication of facilities, or the achievement of a greater degree of tax equalization and ability to finance public services.

The existence of a large number of small districts, each with small school attendance and limited resources, often results

in great inequalities of taxable valuations and tax burdens. Unequal distribution of railroad and utility valuations between districts—permitting, for instance, a few districts to have the sole right to tax such property—may intensify this problem. A small district fortunate enough to have a railroad running through it may enjoy a comparatively low tax rate because of higher total revenues, while another district may be unable to provide a decent minimum standard of service because it lacks a sufficient tax base.

Effects of Recommendations Considered.

It is obvious that the final effect of certain adjustments which may be recommended by the planning committees—such as tax exemption of land which may result from transfer of privately owned lands to public ownership or control, downward revision of land valuations for tax purposes because of a change from farming to forestry or grazing, or the removal of certain public services due to population decrease—may so affect taxable values in given districts that the ability to finance needed services in those districts is restricted. Thus, the consolidation of school districts or the adoption of a county-unit school system may be recommended as desirable, so as to equalize within the entire county the burden of public costs.

A county-unit system has been formed, for example, in one of the northern cut-over counties of Minnesota. In spite of low assessed-property values and frequent instances of isolated settlement, the school system has been so reorganized as to decrease costs and, at the same time, to improve the educational system very materially. Savings were made in all school costs except that of transportation, which increased a little more than 10 percent as a result of the consolidations. The number of rural schools operated was cut from 37 to 11, and total operating costs were reduced 14 percent. The average length of the school term was increased, the qualifications for teachers were raised, high schools were provided, and all pupils living 2 miles or more from a school are now transported to school by buses.

Another county in the same State achieved similar results by dissolving all but two school districts and allowing the county to look after the schools that formerly were in the other school districts. The number of schools was reduced from 39 to 20, and costs went down 37 percent. Costs per pupil were cut from \$147 to \$87, at the same time that a gain in the standards of education was made possible.

Still again, one county in Missouri recently found that by constructing a short road connecting two existing routes it could consolidate two schools, eliminate one school bus, and provide better schooling for the pupils involved.

Roads Present Still Other Questions.

Keeping in view their longer term plans for land adjustments and settlement, county planning committees often may wish to examine their county road systems. They may call upon State or Federal agencies for traffic surveys to determine the relation of traffic volume to types of roads and other facts. Frequently they will wish to look into the maintenance requirements of certain roads and consider the possible need for new roads, for feeders to better roads, or for hard-surfacing certain roads.

Under present or proposed conditions, small road districts and township road units with only a few miles of road may be supplying inferior service at high costs. Frequently such small units do not have a large enough tax base to do a very satisfactory job.

For example, in one of the cut-over counties of Minnesota 24 towns (units comparable to townships) had a tax delinquency of more than 70 percent of current levies, and 14 towns had assessed valuations of less than \$50,000. The final solution arrived at for this problem was to dissolve these towns and put the roads under county administration.

Governmental Reorganization and Consolidations.

Tax resources and population are so limited in some counties that consolidation with one or more adjoining counties may be recommended by several planning committees, in the interest of lower costs and more adequate services. Even

when consolidation of counties is not needed, sizable savings without sacrifice of services can be obtained in some instances, perhaps by combining the work of certain local offices. The joint provision, by two or more counties, of certain services such as law enforcement, relief, health services, and construction and maintenance of highways, may also be feasible in certain cases. The latter type of consolidation has had more success than complete consolidation, for it has the advantage of permitting the governmental unit—the county, the township, the village—to retain its identity and still make the needed savings.

Illustrative of one of the attempts being made to attack the county reorganization problem is the action of local groups in Billings County, N. Dak., in 1939. After a survey of the county's land use and fiscal problems, it was determined that the population, tax base, and public revenues were too limited to permit continuance of a full county budget. Tax delinquency was severe. Debt and tax rates, already high, were increasing. Neither drastic economies in public services nor the combining of offices would permit continued operation without increase in debt. Legislation was obtained in 1939 permitting the disorganizing of the county by petition and election, and allowing it to be attached to an adjoining county for administrative and judicial purposes.

Planning committees find that State constitutions and State laws rigidly prescribe the offices and services to be maintained by many counties. These offices may account for a major portion of what are virtually fixed costs. Planning committees in some States are giving attention now to possible amendment of State laws to permit optional forms of county government and other types of reorganization. In others, however, permissive legislation already exists. New interpretations of existing laws also may give authority for making desired changes.

Planning Committees May Take Initiative.

Planning committees may well take the initiative, not only in exploring the possibilities of existing legislation, but also in

arousing the public interest to the need for possible improvements. In any event, a close examination is needed as to the quantity, the quality, and the cost of each of the public services now provided.

Another thought to bear in mind is that some local-government units, set up many decades ago, may not be entirely adapted to supply modern services, because of changes in land use, population, communication, and other conditions. Expected agricultural development may not have occurred, or, if it did, it may have resulted in the haphazard growth of overlapping units for taxing and spending; or the type of local organization may have been borrowed from the area from which the original settlers came, and may not be suited to current conditions.

The local debt situation is a pressing problem in some counties. Many local units of government must devote from one-half to three-fourths of their annual budgets to the service of debt and other fixed costs. Frequently heavy bonded indebtedness is the source of exorbitant tax rates, depressed land values, and extensive tax delinquency. If default is widespread, perhaps debt-scaling or refinancing is necessary. Changes in tax-due dates may be found helpful in avoiding some of the charges associated with floating debt, by bringing in collections earlier in the fiscal year for which they are intended. The county planning committees' recommendations on these problems may often lead to a better basis for planning of expenditure.

Tax Collection and Delinquent Lands.

Tax-collection procedure and policy with regard to tax-delinquent land are important matters to most counties. The ways in which county or State tax-deed lands are used, and the disposal that is made of them, should be discussed with local officials in all areas where chronic tax delinquency is a problem. The exchange of occupied tax-delinquent land in areas where few people live, for tax-deeded land in more closely settled areas, will often be helpful to counties, particularly in reducing the high costs of public services for isolated areas.

Withholding from sale those properties which are repeatedly delinquent may often help to prevent continued high costs resulting from scattered settlement. It may be advisable, too, to retain in public ownership all tax-deeded land that consistently comes back on the county's hands. The record of chronic tax delinquency and tax reversion in certain areas will usually have an important bearing on land use recommendations. This record planning also will affect the suggestions that committees make as to the maintenance or reorganization of the local public services.

Any plan for using tax-deeded lands, in a program of adjustment by leasing, should be based upon a careful study of how much permanent revenue such leasing will provide for support of local government.

Cooperation of State and Local Governments.

Not infrequently, the greater part of public money spent for local services in an area may be provided by State-aid funds. Unfortunately, local districts sometimes assume that unlimited receipt of State-aid funds is a matter of right under all conditions, despite lack of real need, or possible decline in the importance of their functions. Action to abandon unneeded roads, for example, may sometimes be postponed simply because State aid is distributed on the basis of so many dollars per mile of road. In examining the State-aid system as it operates in a county, the approach should not be merely that of regarding as subsidies all State-aid money received in excess of the State taxes paid by people of the county. State aid for local governments is usually designed to support local services, particularly in rural areas, by appropriating State-wide revenues for purely local purposes. The justification for this is found in the need for adequately maintaining those public services that are important to the general welfare—services such as education, roads, and health.

Perhaps owing to the studies made by the land use planning committee, the committee may wish to explore the possibilities of expanding, redirecting, or curtailing present expenditures of State-aid funds.

Attitudes of various community groups towards local governmental changes that may be desirable or required, should be determined by county planning committees through public meetings, discussions, and other means. For example, residents of a certain school district might have an entirely different view from the county planning committee as to the desirability of consolidating or dissolving districts. These attitudes are important, and it is necessary for planning committees to take them into full account in deciding upon its recommendations.

New Tools Being Sought.

In almost every State, better methods and tools are being sought to increase the efficiency of both the system of State support and the local administration of public services. At the same time, more and more public services are being demanded in nearly every area. Little attention is usually given, however, to present local expenditures of receipts from State-wide sources.

It is here that the State planning committee proves of prime value to the counties, by shaping up county recommendations on problems needing State action. Recommendations of the county planning committees, revealing the ills found within the counties and suggesting solutions for them, go to the State planning committee. When this committee notes problems of widespread importance among the counties, so that a definite State problem is revealed, the committee can be expected to draft recommendations on a State-wide basis for remedying it.

Cooperative efforts between the county committees and their State planning committee may be the most effective mechanism for informing the State government of the needs of the people for remedial measures. These measures in the field of local government may take such form as changes in the amount or method of distributing State aid; permissive legislation concerning local government disorganization, consolidation, or optional forms of organization; and the authorization of other needed policies and activities.

Previous publications in this County Planning Series:

- No. 1.—County Land Use Planning.
- No. 2.—Membership of Land Use Planning Committees.
- No. 3.—The Land Use Planning Organization.
- No. 4.—The Scope of Land Use Planning.
- No. 5.—Pooling Ideas in Land Use Planning.
- No. 6.—Communities and Neighborhoods in Land Use Planning.
- No. 7.—Rural Zoning and Land Use Planning.

